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# Alumni, philanthropist looks back as she moves forward

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BY ANNA PRYOR SUN STAFF ON 05/18/2015

CAMPUS



*"Do not go gentle into that good night,*

*Old age should burn and rage at close of day;*

*Rage, rage against the dying of the light."*

- Dylan Thomas

Margie Reese lives life by her motto that every day above ground is a good day.

Reese was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2008 and is in her seventh year of surviving. She now has stage four cancer that has metastasized to the bone.

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Can you say "camp craziness?"

Cancer has not defined her. She decided to attend Southwestern College a year later after a close encounter with death.

"In the middle of my first treatment I had a cardiac arrest," she said. "When I woke up, I figured if I was going to kick the bucket, I should do something on my bucket list. I always wanted a journalism degree, so five days after my cardiac arrest I was sitting in my first journalism class."

Her first class at SWC remained her favorite. Former journalism instructor Jerry McCormick required students to create a blog.

"Everybody in class seemed to know what a blog was, but not the old lady," she said. "I leaned over and said 'What's a blog?' to the next student. They looked at me like I was from outer space."

Reese sat front and center in classes, determined to graduate. Despite the initial learning curve, she earned her AA degree in journalism in 2011 and an English degree in 2012, graduating with a 4.0 GPA. She started a third degree in Criminal Justice that she has not yet completed. She said her best years were at SWC, the best day being spent walking across the stage at graduation.

"I had the best time at Southwestern College," she said. "I always wanted to go to school when I was younger, never thinking I was going to wait until my 60s to go. It was a great experience because I learned about poetry, I learned about politics. Stuff I had never touched on."

Of politics and poetry, a poem that she holds dear is "Do not go gentle into that good night" by Welsh poet Dylan Thomas.

"I took that as my poem I had to read in class and now it's like my battle cry," she said. "I think that's what I should do. I should 'rage, rage against the dying of the light.' I can't let this cancer beat me. I've got to die someday, but not soon. I've still got some things to do."

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A priority on her bucket list is to complete her autobiography. Writing is an exhausting process, she said, because of the cancer. She does not want to write without being inspired. To her, it would be a bunch of meaningless words.

"I try to visualize something that will push me forward, so I visualize a book signing, with all these people lining the block, waiting for me to sign it," she said. "But I guess if I can just finish it, that'll be good enough."

Reese said reminiscing is an emotional process.

"Some of the passages, some of the things that have happened in my life, I really prefer not to deal with," she said. "So that's a hump to get over as well. Not just feeling well enough to write it, but also having to relive it and be left in a pile of tears."

Reese was a victim of illegal sex trafficking when she was 17.

"It was nothing more than trusting the wrong person and as a teenager, you don't know the difference between someone that's conning you and someone that really wants to help you," she said. "So I went with the wrong person, a stranger. It was the wrong thing to do, but it didn't deserve what happened afterwards."

For years, she blamed herself. Even after escaping, she did not seek counseling and stopped speaking to the man she was engaged to for fear of judgment.

"You think somehow it's your fault," she said. "Then you think it's because you're a bad person. Then you think everyone knows and no one's going to want to talk to you. It took a good 15 years to come to a place where I could say I was the victim, but I'm not a victim anymore and if I continue to let this affect my life, then this guy is continuing to pimp me and rape me and turn me out."

Like her ability to visualize her book signing to propel her forward, she said she developed coping mechanisms to help her survive.

"There's a trick that the mind does," she said. "I'm not sure it happens in every incident or with every person, but you think of something else. When you're being violated you think of something else. You can't think of what's happening to you."

Reese said she could not go to the police because she would be seen as a criminal. Her situation happened in 1964, but she said these issues still exist and there is little help for victims. When trying to call to see what resources are available, she was told there is a referral hotline.

"I'm on the street, I've got a pimp chasing me down the alley with a knife, I'm jumping in the back of this truck and going to a bus station. Why isn't there a call that I can make where someone can come pick me up and help me in the immediate situation I need? But there isn't. That was 50 years ago. In 50 years they couldn't figure out the best way to help the kids on the street. That's really disgusting. If I had the energy, that would be where I would be focusing it."

Although she never sought counseling, she learned to forgive herself and the man who pimped her out.

"I learned to define my own self," she said. "I am not what happened to me. I'm Margie Reese. A lot of things that happened made me stronger. Some things, especially the rape, just made me pissed off. For so many years, I hated this man. I finally let that go, because you can't run around hating folks that are hopefully dead. It gave me a lot of comfort to think he's probably dead by now."

Reese married in 1966 and had four children. She married an African-American, which led to several dangerous encounters with racism. She said her father-in-law warned his son not to marry her.

"I didn't have a clue that we were illegal in some states," she said. "I didn't care. His father said, 'Boy, are you crazy? You can't marry that white girl.' I was standing at that phone booth listening to my future father-in-law give it to us, asking if we were crazy, telling us we were in a world of trouble."

They found it difficult to rent. Her husband lost his job the day after she picked him up from work. When they were moving to Portland, Oregon, they were almost killed by truckers.

"We were so naive," she said. "We were waving up to the truckers and they looked down and saw my husband and my baby and next thing you know one's moving beside us, one's moving behind us and they're steady trying to push us off the road to kill us. It scared me to death, I was in hysterics."

She is no longer married, but says she does not believe that racial prejudice has improved.

From 1994 to 2001, Reese owned a recording studio. She said it was the second best time of her life, after her time at SWC. One of her favorite memories was recording an album by a young artist named David who was dying of Leukemia.

"A friend of his from the Rock Church called and said they were looking for a studio that would let them record his hip-hop Christian music. They didn't have any money and they were calling all the studios to see if they'd let him come in and record because he had Leukemia. He was only 23. I said, 'If you get the money, pay us. If you don't, that's okay.'"

Reese never told her parents that she was forced into sex slavery. When she was diagnosed with cancer, she was taking care of her ailing mother.

"At the time, my mom had come to live with me so when I came home from the biopsy, I told the caregiver to tell my mom I had the flu so I could stay in my room for a couple of days and recover," she said. "I never told her. I never told her I had cancer because I'm her only child and I figured she didn't need to know that. About three months after I found out, she died."

Reese had her biopsy done by a surgeon she previously worked for. He told her he could barely get the biopsy because there was a large tumor attached to the inside of her nipple. After seeing before and after photos of mastectomies, she said, she was set on not having one.

"He patted me and said 'We love you. We're going to take good care of you and give you a mastectomy.' I patted him back and said 'I don't think so.'"

Seven years later, she is thankful to still have her breasts. She is also happy to have her hair, which she attributes to the vitamins she takes. The cancer has moved to her bones, though, and in October 2010 her right hip was replaced, which she said was the worst pain she has ever felt.

"They couldn't get enough drugs into me to keep me from screaming. I was in such bad shape. At one point I was asking them to kill me. I said, 'Please just kill me. I can't do this. Get my gun and just kill me.' Of course, nobody did, so I still had to go through it."

Now, with tumors up and down her side, her doctors are worried about her bones fracturing so she gets bone shots to strengthen them. She estimates she has had at least eight different types of treatments, in different places with different doctors. She was recently cleared to begin a new treatment called Ibrance, which she was previously denied. She researched the treatment herself and likes it because it is in pill form, not injections.

"You should be your own advocate in the medical industry," she said. "Keep in mind that it's an industry. They make money every time they scan you, every time they give you drugs."

In regards to money, the treatment comes with a hefty price tag at \$10,000 a month. Even after co-pay from insurance, it would still cost \$2,000 per month. Reese said she has a coupon for the first month free and will look to find foundations to help pay from there. She is optimistic about the new treatment.

"I'm hoping it gives me a few more years, because evidently that's how long it's going to take me to finish this stupid book," she said with a laugh.

Reese said she is often complimented on her strength and bravery in dealing with the negative experiences in her life, but there is something that nobody knows about her.

"I get scared," she said. "People always say 'You're so brave,' and I think, No. You just don't know. There's times that I sit here and cry. There's times that I regret wasting time doing different things. There's times that I regret wasting time on certain people when I should've known it wasn't going to make any difference in the long run. They need to know that just because you're fighting and you look strong, it doesn't mean that you're not scared. You get scared. Since everyone's going to die, you don't think about it. But with all this, it's thrust upon you. You don't have any other choice but to think about it."

She does partake in the small comforts of life in times of anxiety or worry.

"Afraid," she said. "I get afraid. But then I have a bowl of no-sugar added ice cream and it makes me feel better. When I first got confined to the house, I got panicky and the first thing I did is call a friend and ask for a sugar-free cheesecake from the Cheesecake Factory. And honey, I ate a piece every day. Someone would say they were coming over and I'd tell them they're not allowed to have any of my cheesecake. It's mine, it's my comfort food and I'm eating the whole dang thing. And so I did."

Reese has begun to prepare for death. She has a tombstone ready for her in the El Cajon Cemetery.

"My headstone has got 'Any day above ground is a good day,' my name and my date of birth," she said. "All it's waiting for is the last day."

Her first time going to visit her burial plot was a sobering experience for her.

"It didn't really hit me until I went to see it," she said. "To look down and see my name on a tombstone. That made me cry. That was the first time I cried about dying."

Besides her degrees, Reese has also been acknowledged at SWC with the college's highest honor, the Student of Distinction Award. She was a recipient of the ASO Academic Excellence, Chicano Latino Coalition and Optimist of the Year awards. She was a member of Phi Beta Kappa, Administration of Justice club, Student Veteran Organization (SVO) and ASTRA.

ASTRA is SWC's community service club and Reese was a part of the student group that originally chartered it. She has also been involved with the Kiwanis Club, Photo Charity and Laurels for Leaders. She said philanthropic work is an important part of her life.

"I think that's the key," she said. "Taking the focus off of yourself and putting it towards something worthwhile that can help others."

Of all the things she has done, Reese said she misses SVO most and wishes she could still attend the meetings. A project she started and would like to finish is the bench program to benefit the SVO. She said the lack of places to sit at the spacious SWC campus was apparent when she was attending while having cancer. There is one bench placed on campus which bears her name. Reese said she might look for someone to take on the project for her, to ensure its completion.

Reese has drawn her will and has told her medical power of attorney, Ervin Cobbs, that she would like to pass peacefully, without fanfare, drama or hospitalization.

"I wanna die right there in my bed. I don't want a bunch of nonsense going on. If people want to come and purge their soul because they think I'm dying, don't let them in. Make them go away. Don't disturb my death, don't disturb my dying. I told Ervin not to let a paramedic walk in with a gurney. I'm gonna tell them, 'I've got a gun. I don't know where the bullets are, but I've got a gun and I'll get it out of the safe, just hold on and let me get up and go get it.'"

For now, she accepts that she will die. She just does not plan to let it happen yet, so she continues to rage against the dying of the light.

"All of us are going to die," she said. "But I'm not trying to do that too soon. So I keep fighting."

To donate to Margie Reese's GoFundMe, go to <http://www.gofundme.com/rs47f84>



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